

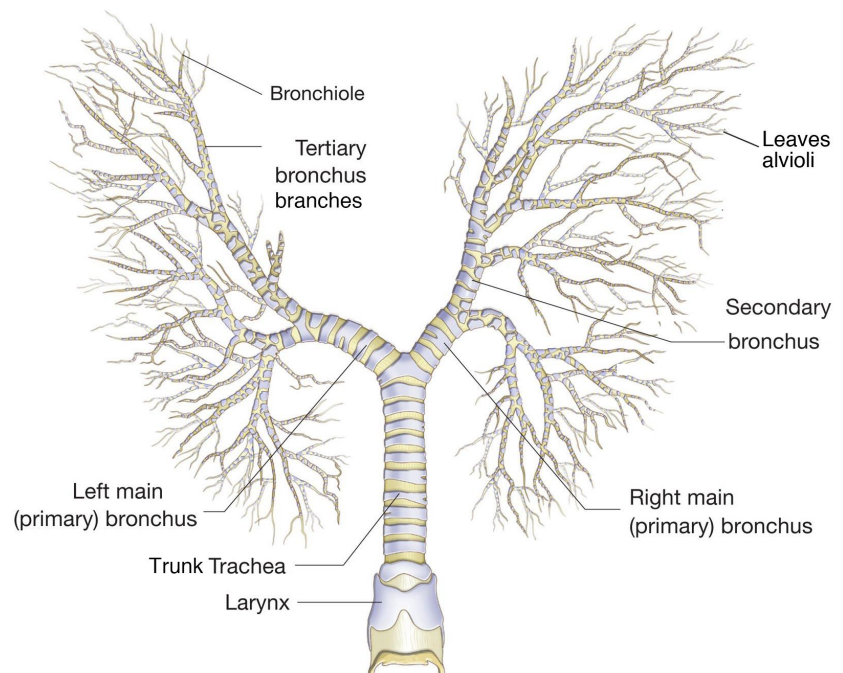
*Hands that Hold*

By Emilio Rojas and Pamela Sneed

Commissioned by the Centre for Human Rights and the Arts  
Bard College, 2021



Let me sip your sap  
 Through a sumac straw  
 I am a vessel,  
 Overflowing.  
 Let me drink your blood  
 of my blood,  
 Your roots  
 imbibe water  
 from the ground  
 Who owns this land?  
 Who was here before us?  
 Whose hands worked  
 the fields, picked up the fruits?  
 My arms, your branches,  
 My torso, your trunk  
 My lungs, your leaves  
 Alveoli,  
 A tree lives inside me,  
 Upside down,  
 I inhale oxygen,  
 Exhale  $\text{CO}_2$   
 You inhale  $\text{CO}_2$   
 Exhale oxygen  
 Beings in symbiosis  
 Invisible rhythms,  
 we've forgotten how to breathe  
 into each other's utterances,  
 language  
 became a thing of the mouth,





And the vocal cords,  
And the body forgot its speech,

when did we think ourselves  
different from the land  
from each other?  
then our mother?  
How much blood,  
sap, serum, suero,  
sweat has fed this soil?  
Whose hands, whose sweat,  
whose blood has dripped  
into this dirt, we try to call home?  
Even if we have been displaced  
to many times  
to count or carry,  
We are settlers in stolen territories  
How can anyone be illegal in looted land?  
What is the weight  
of the blood running  
through my veins,  
valves, and vacancies?  
Each drop a portal  
a place to be,  
The sweet locus of your origin  
Blood like sap traveling  
Through my body.  
I inhale oxygen,  
Exhale CO<sub>2</sub>  
You inhale CO<sub>2</sub>  
Exhale oxygen

Am I drinking from the roots,  
or from the branches?  
Which way does your scarlet gown flow,  
the color of cardinals and martyrs,  
sweet rain and iron  
Our bodies swelling,  
made of water and matter.  
But you,  
you built yourself from light,  
winding water into form.

The ants are the only witnesses,  
Demanding their right to opacity,  
They come closer to drink  
Drip your blood  
Into my gaping mouth  
Well of fulfillment and lack,  
Underneath my tongue  
A chalice,  
waiting for  
the seed of your seasons,



Maybe this is what Mary Oliver meant  
When she wrote: "Look, the trees  
are turning their own bodies  
into pillars of light"<sup>1</sup>



Sugarcoat my throat,  
 with your children,  
 holding hands.  
 like five-year-olds on a fieldtrip  
 crossing the street,  
 a truck with no brakes  
 Fast approaching,  
 The plates read INVZIBL.  
 Rain down to my stomach,  
 Let yourself into my bloodstream,  
 pump yourself in,  
 sucrose, serum, sap,  
 soil, sugar rush.  
 a wound bleeding  
 like a bullet hole,  
 a crime scene of sap,  
 a stream of sweet ancestry

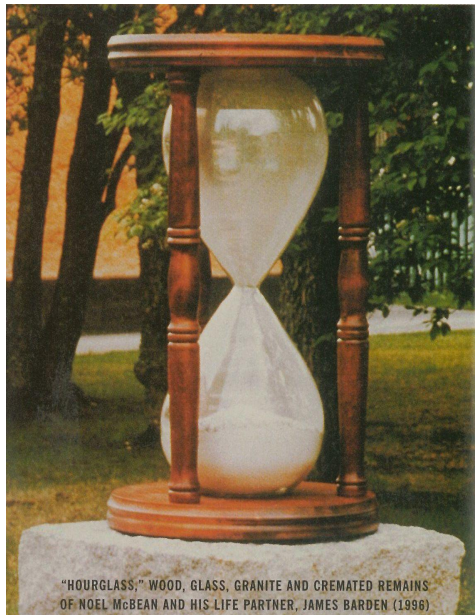
You keep flowing  
 like the Mississippi  
 aided by gravity  
 and the perfect memory of water,  
 remembering its place,  
 Back to the ocean,



maybe this is what Toni Morrison,  
 meant when she wrote:  
 "Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding;  
 it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be.  
 All water has a perfect memory and is forever  
 trying to get back to where it was." 2



We have the same blood type  
 Running through our veins,  
 The blood of my murdered sisters,  
 brothers, children,  
 You have witnessed their passing,  
 Through pandemics and massacres,  
 mourning is a wave in an ocean of absence,  
 crashing again and again upon our shores,  
 sometimes a high tide,  
 sometimes a tsunami,  
 I mourn the mentors  
 I was meant to meet,



Your sap heals the wounds,  
 Or at least, soothes me  
 to know I won't die of thirst,  
 Perhaps of sadness,  
 they say time heals everything,  
 I wonder whose clock  
 keeps track of trauma?  
 Mourning is a bitter syrup  
 taken drop by drop,  
 underneath the tongue  
 an offering for the departed.  
 some people say that salt  
 heals everything,  
 tears, sweat, the ocean.  
 I've learned to heal myself  
 by licking my own wounds  
 again and again,  
 Until rivers become scars



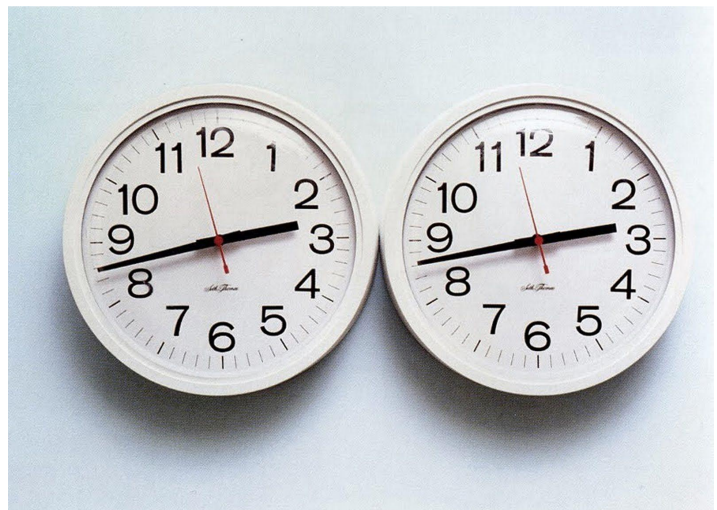
Maybe this is what Oli Rodriguez  
 meant when he wrote:

"I was seeking that absence.

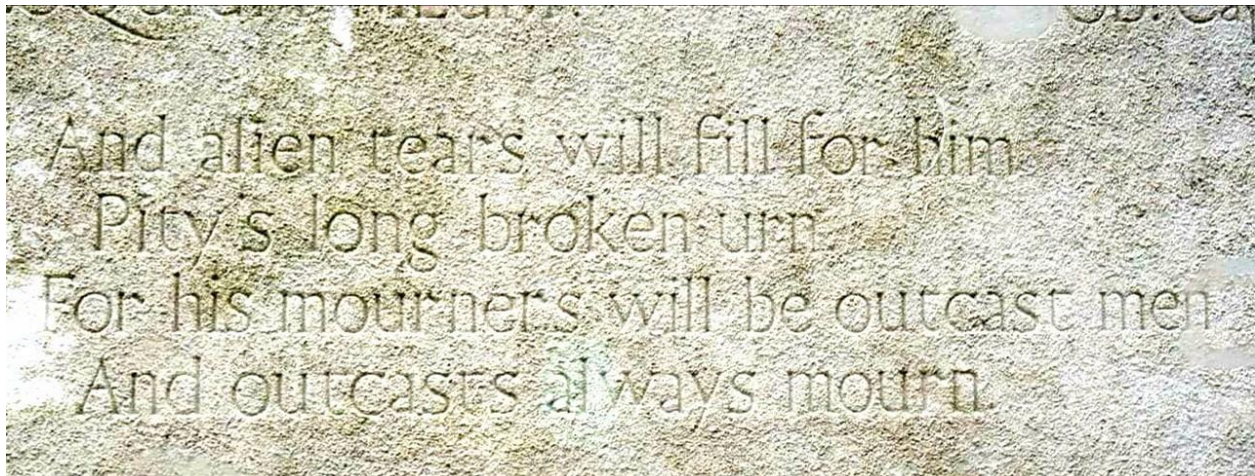
This absence signifies the potential teacher, father, lover,  
 friend that we could have loved, fought, and felt.

AIDS devastated these potential connections.

And these non-relationships are part of our daily mourning."<sup>3</sup>



The epitaph in the tomb of Oscar Wilde  
at Père Lachaise In Paris reads:



We are the outcasts always mourning,  
Day in and day out,  
Mourning birds singing,  
Praying, wishing.  
He was having a bad day.

They say,  
White man tend to  
cradle their offspring  
tenderly tucking them to bed,  
a weighted blanket  
So they never wake up,  
Keep dreaming they will get  
a job after college,  
a fenced house,  
If not they could blame their  
mediocrity on us,  
Meritocracy is also a syrup  
All Americans drip over their  
Piles of pancakes,  
While Amazon workers  
Try to unionize,  
I will take your job,  
your titles,  
and perhaps  
Your bullets,  
And my sap will flow,

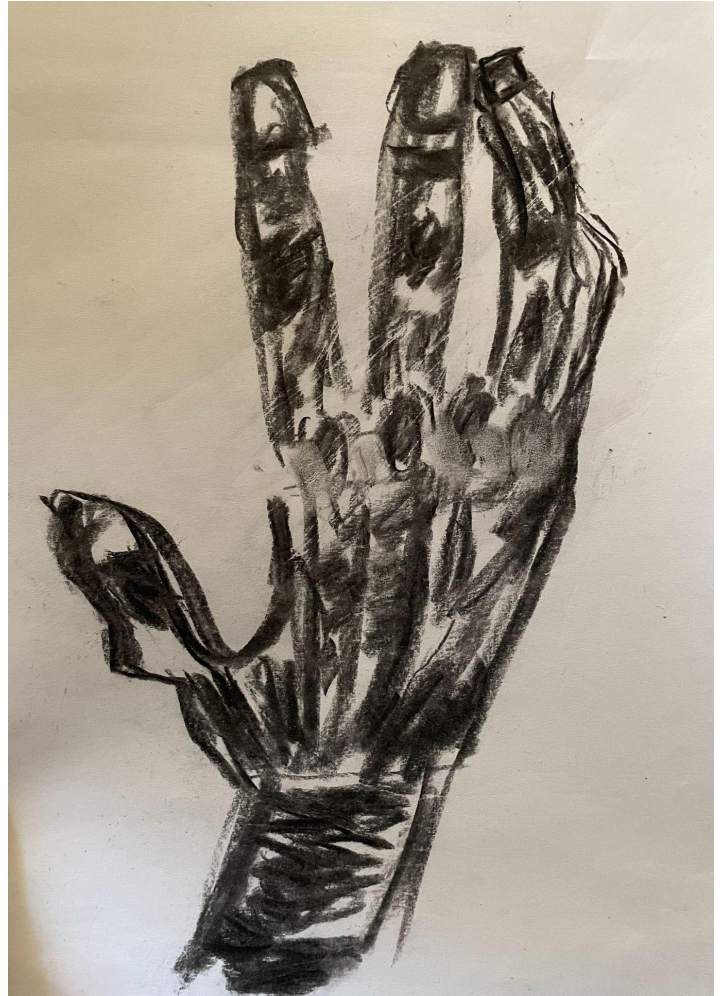
I have lesbian hands  
black brown lesbian hands  
hands to match a 6 feet 2 inch frame  
I choose to call myself lesbian  
not because it defines who I have sex with  
but its political  
Outsider, outlaw, one who loves women, defines herself.  
They say it's biological but we do make choices  
mine was to never fit in easy



to be honest  
to say my brown woman's body was worth love  
I teach the invisible man to my students

Audre Lorde expresses the duality of wanting to be seen  
but also being seen is the source of our greatest fear. 4

I once helped a black lesbian who grew up in foster care  
and was neglected terribly  
write a poem about the power of invisibility  
so powerful they forgot to comb her hair  
make sure she had food  
As a visual artist too I love to draw hands  
in figure drawing class  
I drew the strongest black hand out of everyone  
It was so powerful and large and capable  
It looked like a glove  
Its fingers and joints almost bionic  
I have a strong touch  
Touch that has been censored  
some editors of my books  
Took out the lesbian sex scenes without asking me  
An agent once told me it was gratuitous and  
unnecessary  
But I'd done it purposefully to show us loving  
and touching each other  
I notice in final drafts of this particular book  
sex with men is left in  
I said tasting you is home to me  
Or another scene of driving into her body  
Full down deep  
As she whispered breathlessly I'm weak  
And there are other scenes that didn't make it into the  
book  
Of someone saying your hands are magic  
I've held many things  
I've lost many things  
My hands have nurtured movements  
I was there in the beginning at Hetrick-Martin Institute  
for queer youth  
Before it was popular  
When the building was just a dilapidated shack  
I ran the after school drop-in center for 5 years  
I was pretty much a youth myself  
But I worked very hard there  
In all the history that's been told of that time and place  
the Harvey Milk High School  
I've never been included  
As someone who teaches writing  
I've had a hand in many artists' careers  
I've built up many  
Most of that work goes unseen  
But this story isn't about me per se I think about brown laborers everywhere  
From slavery onward  
I think it's interesting they call black people lazy  
But it was white people who enslaved millions to do work they didn't want



Anyway those black hands also are unseen  
Yes thinking about those black bodies who die every day  
So people can wear and buy diamonds with no knowledge of where they are from.  
Buy and do cocaine with no knowledge of where it comes from.

Even though the murderous cop Derek Chauvin is on trial for the murder of George Floyd  
The cops who killed Breonna Taylor walked free and the world is a mess  
fighting COVID-19 with other pressing issues  
I want to divert here  
From human rights topics  
Which my student says is really about human wrongs  
Instead, I want to write to use my paper and pen as tools and vehicles by which to praise artists  
There are different types and forms of praise poems from Yoruba and Zulu tribes onward  
But the main point is to pay tribute  
And this praise poem I'm shaping is for all the artists considered by some as small and insignificant  
But have lifted in my opinion some of the heavy loads of this pandemic  
Whose work like women, black and brown people and millions of documented and undocumented workers  
From factories to farms  
goes underappreciated  
Unseen  
And expected for free  
Or minimum wages





Like those brown hands picking away fruit from thorny branches  
in one hundred degree temperatures so you can enjoy supermarket produce  
And a warm meal,  
Or tiny brown hands harvesting cocoa  
Today this poem says I see you  
I want to thank all the artists who carried us through the uncertainty of this pandemic  
Whose music and art lifted spirits  
when people were lost and stayed at home  
For all artists through their craft and voices  
helped people regain equilibrium and purpose  
Who even with nothing in times of drought and catastrophe  
offered seeds  
planted a way  
a path  
Took leftovers like wood wire and plastic to build vessels  
Like guides shamans and mystics during slavery offering meals routes clothing and inspiration to runaways  
I want to thank all the artists for pitching in to save the institutions  
that were actually constructed and meant to save us  
Artists who gave and give away work  
fitting for museums at little or no cost  
donated time services art and poetry  
when old ways crumbled  
showed up and knew what to do  
I want to thank all the artists  
Who didn't have enough for themselves  
But still gave like mothers setting a table for friends  
and neighbors' children  
there is more to healing the body  
than medicine alone  
Those who know that music  
Art  
Poetry  
Dance  
are just as essential  
as doctors  
Nurses  
And other people in healthcare  
Like food delivery workers  
who provide sustenance  
Without it,  
without them we could not survive



Every time I wash my hands  
I thank my hands for holding,  
we inherited, by virtue  
born breathing,  
Deeds of our ancestors,  
Heavy with fire,  
I wash them away with water,  
afraid of the invisible traces  
What I touched,  
When, in which order  
prevent the spread  
contaminated hands,  
your nostrils, your eyes,  
become a stranger to yourself  
hold my knees tight  
to catch my tears,  
This past year I washed my hands  
10 to 20 times a day,  
about 127,000 seconds,  
Or 35 hours  
Time has changed name,  
returned and forgot again,  
Enough time for the soap molecules  
the crown of the corona,  
Once the viral coat is broken down,

I say a prayer,  
the burdens and the blessings  
of being  
Sins of our fathers,  
We carry them ~~both~~ like anger,  
Guilt, duty and desire,  
Let them go down the drain,  
The virus left in surfaces,  
Who touched it before,  
avoid exposure,  
An invisible enemy  
Do not touch your face  
your mouth,  
Many times I cry  
to prevent the impulse  
like a bucket catches a leak,  
More than probably my entire life,  
20 seconds of washing,  
2125 minutes,  
But who's counting?  
collapsed and expanded,  
For 20 seconds I wash,  
To disrupt the fatty layer surrounding  
Then you can't catch it,



like myself most of this past year,  
In my head I count,  
“No Scrubs” by TLC  
“I’m Still Standing” by Elton John,  
Those chorus lasted 20 seconds,  
For 20 seconds I wash  
Ablution,  
Water cleans and cleanses,  
So when I wash my hands,  
the rage, the depression,  
For 20 seconds I wash  
And I wait  
Touch  
To come into  
As a noun.  
“add a touch of flavor”  
Without touching  
Mostly zoom and sound,  
My mother over the phone  
Says:  
“Apapacho” from the nahuatl,  
My arms miss your embrace,  
My face your palms,  
Of all things,  
the parts that do not add.

is no longer able to function,  
for 20 seconds I wash,  
I sing the chorus  
“Ironie” by Alanis Morissette  
I read in an article  
I timed it, just to make sure,  
All religions share one thing  
purification through water,  
Hydrates and drowns,  
I let go of the fear,  
the anxiety,  
And I wish,  
Stop being wishy washy.  
As a verb,  
or be in contact with.  
A small amount  
To stay in touch,  
One another,  
no touch,  
(Twenty one hundred miles away)  
“Mijo, Te hace falta un apapacho”  
Meaning to caress with the soul,  
My head your fingers,  
6 feet now is the measurement  
The sum of the parts and

Who can afford to stay at home?  
the invisible labor of bodies,

When does touch become labor?  
Whose hands keep this world going?



Picking fruit,  
cleaning,  
sowing,  
sorting,  
packing,  
preaching,

Driving buses,  
Feeding,  
cooking,  
healing,  
nursing,  
teaching,  
reaching,

Every time I wash my hands,  
For my hands, for your hands,  
And I imagine touching you,

A say a prayer for those hands,  
For our hands,  
I am a mourning bird,



Yet I'm not an early riser

Those hand who have left

died to early,

I read

as a reminder

I now know by heart

rings like a bell

every morning I mourn

the mentors I was meant to meet,

AIDS, cancer, diabetes

again and again

the same poem by Lucille Clifton

her voice echos,

Every hour on the hour:

“i made it up  
here on this bridge between  
starshine and clay,  
my one hand holding tight  
my other hand; come celebrate  
with me that everyday  
something has tried to kill me  
and has failed.”<sup>5</sup>



## Endnotes

1 Mary Oliver. "In Black Water Woods" *American Primitive: Poems*, (New York; Back Bay Books, 1984) lines 1-5

2 Morrison, Toni. "The Site of Memory" *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, 2d ed., ed. William Zinsser (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 83-102

3 Rodriguez, Oli. "Papi, Papi, Papi." *Poetry Foundation*, 2020.  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/154248/papi-papi-papi>. Accessed 24 March 2021.

4 "That visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength."  
Lorde, Audre. "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." *Sister Outsider : Essays and Speeches*.  
Trumansburg, NY :Crossing Press, 1984.

5 Clifton, Lucille. "won't you celebrate with me" from *Book of Light*. Copyright © 1993 by Lucille Clifton.

## Image Credits (top to bottom)

Emilio Rojas, *Exercises for Becoming (Blood of my Blood)*, 2021. Durational Performance, 6.5 hours.

Emilio Rojas, *Trees are Lungs*, Inverted and altered anatomical drawing, digital collage.

Pamela Sneed, *Blossoms*, 2020. Watercolor. 5x7 in. Courtesy of the Artist. 2021

Emilio Rojas, *Exercises for Becoming (Blood of my Blood)*, 2021. Durational Performance, 6.5 hours.

Stock Images, Vanity Plate INVZIBL, photography.

Stock Images, New Orleans flood, Hurricane Katrina, 2005.

Barton Lidice Benes, *Hourglass*, 1996. Wood, glass, granite and cremated remains of Noel McBean and his life partner, James Barden.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, Clocks, paint on wall, 1991. © 2021 The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Emilio Rojas, photo of tomb of Oscar Wilde, Père Lachaise, Paris, 2011.

Pamela Sneed, *Untitled*, 2020. Charcoal. 9x12 in. Courtesy of the Artist. 2021.

Last 4 photos: Emilio Rojas, *Hands to Hold*, 2021, casts of artist's hands made of Lavender soap and crystals, photographic documentation of the hands and 6 hours durational performance of washing.